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'We didn't realise how brave we were at the time': the 1968 Ford sewing machinists' strike in public and personal memory

by Jonathan Moss

Abstract: The 1968 sewing machinists' strike for equal grading at Ford's plant in Dagenham has been identified as a key moment in the history of women and work, widely associated with prompting the 1970 Equal Pay Act and presaging a period that saw the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement and increased gender equality in Britain. Public memory of the strike's legacy was transmitted to a wider audience through the 2010 feature film *Made in Dagenham*. This article shows that this was not necessarily how the sewing machinists understood the strike's outcome at the time, or in the period since. The article considers the impact of film on the personal memory of women involved in the dispute and explores how they negotiated the tension between their newfound public role as history-makers and their personal experience of defeat.

Key words: popular memory; film; equal pay; Dagenham; women's strike

On 29 May 1968, the 187 female sewing machinists at Ford's River Plant in Dagenham, Essex, walked out of their factory and apparently 'into the pages of history' as they went on strike against sex discrimination in their job grading.¹ The strike lasted for three weeks and brought Ford's entire British production line to a standstill. It was resolved when Ford asked Barbara Castle, the Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity, to intervene and persuade the women to return to work. Instead of recognising the sewing machinists' demand for skill recognition, the women were offered a seven per cent pay increase and the



promise of equal pay legislation in the future. As a result, although the women did not gain the re-grading they desired, the strike has been seen as a landmark in British industrial relations, widely associated with prompting the 1970 Equal Pay Act and securing equal pay for women across Britain.

This idea has been popularised by the feature film produced about the strike in 2010 by Stephen Wooley and Elizabeth Karlsen called *Made in Dagenham*, now transformed into a West End musical ('Made in Dagenham', Adelphi Theatre). The film was a box office hit and has been described as a 'feel-good movie'²,



Mass meeting of women sewing machinists at the Ford Motor Company plant in Dagenham following their vote to take strike action. Photo: Pat Mantle/Trades Union Congress Collections, London/Metropolitan University.

which portrays the strike as a progressive campaign for women's rights that acts as a direct catalyst for the passing of the 1970 Equal Pay Act. The subsequent publicity generated by the film has proceeded to weave the place of the dispute firmly within the history of women and gender equality in Britain. Gregor Gall wrote in *The Guardian*:

But make history the Ford women machinists did. Their action was the inspiration for the Equal Pay Act 1970 [...] the Dagenham women workers were among those that laid the foundations for something bigger – women starting to play a much fuller part in deciding how their workplace relations were determined.³

From the opposite end of the spectrum, the *Daily Mail* claimed the women 'changed the course of British

history by going on strike in 1968, demanding the same wages as the men and paving the way for the 1970 Equal Pay Act.'⁴ As a result, the strike has become fixed in public understanding as a key point in the development of improved rights for women in Britain during the twentieth century. Yet this was not necessarily how the sewing machinists had remembered it themselves.

In June 2013, I interviewed Gwen Davis, Eileen Pullen, Sheila Douglas and Vera Sime in a group interview at Vera's home in Rainham, Essex.⁵ All four women were born in the 1930s and had worked either as sewing machinists or seamstresses in various factories after leaving school at the age of fourteen. At the time of the strike, they were all in their thirties and members of the National Union of Vehicle Builders (NUVB) as part of a closed-shop agreement. Gwen, Eileen and Vera remained in the machine shop at Ford for the rest of their working lives; Sheila moved to the office after the

strike and took on an administrative role; all four retired in the 1980s. The interview was part of a larger study that examines the experiences and political consciousness of working-class women engaged in industrial disputes in Britain during the 1970s.⁶ Oral history was used to gain an insight into what these workers 'wanted to do, believed they were doing and what they now think they did', to understand how changes in the gendered division of labour, trade unionism and second wave feminism influenced the everyday lives and political understanding of working-class women in post-war Britain.⁷

From my initial contact with the former sewing machinists on the phone it was clear that the film had affected their lifestyles. Since its production, they have attended film premieres across the world, been interviewed on numerous occasions and in 2013 were voted 'Women of the Year' by *Woman's Weekly* magazine.⁸ This public recognition and intrusion into their daily lives marked a stark contrast to how my interviewees remembered being treated during the strike. Gwen explained to me:

I think we were just forgotten about until the film came out...they didn't bother with us, the newspapers, did they? [...] After the strike they took our photo to see us going back into the factory but they weren't interested then because we hadn't got what we wanted'.⁹

Not only did they feel their action had been disregarded, but the women had considered the strike's outcome as a defeat, because they did not achieve the re-grading that they originally desired and never received the wages that they felt they deserved. Gwen pointed out:

I mean really Ford's had won, if we're being honest, after we had gone back to work Ford's had won because we never got our grading. We hadn't got what we wanted... All they had given us was a rise. And not an equal pay rise, not equality.¹⁰

So the film had not only changed the sewing machinists' daily lives in the present, but had also affected 'what they now think they did' in the past.

This article is concerned with why an unsuccessful strike over a grading issue has been publically remembered as a victory for equal pay, and the impact of this public narrative upon the sewing machinists' individual memories. In the process, it examines how the memory of the strike has been appropriated as a victory by trade unionists and feminist activists to support their own narratives of campaigning for women's rights in the workplace, and how the film has transmitted this progressive narrative to a wider audience. An analysis of the sewing machinists' subjective understandings of why they went on strike, and how they felt it had affected them since, permits for a more complex view of the strike's meaning than previous accounts, which have largely considered the strike's influence on other women workers outside the Ford motor company and on equal pay legis-

lation. The article examines how the women attempted to resolve the tension between their public role as 'history-makers' and their personal experience and perception of defeat in the context of the group interview. It suggests that whilst group interviews present issues concerning relationships of power and influence between interviewees, they also offer individuals the opportunity to share their concerns and uncertainty over public memories.¹¹ In doing so, the article provides an example of how individuals realign their personal memories to fit with contemporary public narratives and make sense of their past in new ways, whilst preserving their individual memories in the process.

Context

The strike was originally called over the issue of grading; the sewing machinists had never raised the issue of equal pay before the union entered negotiations with the company.¹² Labour relations at Ford, Dagenham were characterised by conflict: over 500 stoppages related to wages and conditions occurred between 1954 and 1956, while the company sacked 1,729 workers in 1956 due to unofficial trade union activity.¹³ Ford attempted to curb workers' militancy by inviting trade union officials to play an active role in developing a new wage structure based on a nationwide job evaluation scheme. The new wage structure was implemented in 1967 and classified the sewing machinists' work in the unskilled B grade, earning eighty-five per cent of the equivalent male wage rate. Hitherto, the sewing machinists were employed in their own separate women's grade, and earned ninety-two per cent of the unskilled male rate, and eighty per cent of the male semi-skilled rate, regardless of the work they were performing.¹⁴ The strike was triggered by the company's failure to recognise the skilled nature of the women's work. As Eileen explained to me, the women had never organised their own strike prior to the new wage structure because:

No there wasn't no grading then, we just sat down and done the job and if the forelady liked you and thought you were doing a good job, you got a penny merit money...¹⁵

Sheila pointed out:

When Ford took over Briggs, that was when the new wage structure came in and that was when we found out that we weren't classed as skilled [...] [We had] claims [to be re-graded] that kept going in every couple of years and they were still ignoring our wants. And so we just said 'enough's enough'. We had a meeting over the canteen and we voted that we should stand up and fight, which is what we did.¹⁶

After seven months of unsuccessfully pursuing their claim through the company's formal grievance procedure, the sewing machinists decided to go on strike at the end of May 1968. The Dagenham women were joined by the 195 female sewing machinists at Ford's

Halewood plant in Liverpool and after two weeks Ford's laid off 9,000 male workers and claimed to be losing £1 million a day as their British production line was brought to a standstill.¹⁷ Ford's managing director Bill Batty indicated the sense of panic when he proclaimed the strike to be a 'critical problem for the British economy' and suggested that 40,000 men could lose their jobs as he sought assistance from prime minister Harold Wilson to bring a swift resolution to the dispute.¹⁸

Sheila Cohen has shown that the strike was resolved by focusing on the issue of equal pay instead of grading.¹⁹ The NUVB and Union of Engineering and Foundry Workers (AEF) supported the women, sensing an opportunity to achieve a rare out-and-out victory against the company, and proceeded to take control of the dispute. However, the male trade union officials were reluctant to challenge the grading structure, which they had played an active role in implementing themselves. Instead, they pledged to support the sewing machinists over the issue of equal pay. Henry Friedman, the NUVB convenor, later explained that the workers 'faced certain defeat by confining the issue to grading, or could fight with some prospect of success under the equal pay banner [...] and make history'.²⁰ *The Times* pointed out that equal pay suited the management; Barbara Castle reflected in her memoirs that Ford had already started to implement equal pay in its other factories and the dispute represented an opportunity to address a potential problem in the future.²¹

As such, Castle organised a crisis meeting on 28 June at Whitehall and invited women members of the strike committee to negotiate a settlement with the Ford management. Castle made it clear that grading was not on the agenda, and instead workers were offered a pay rise and the promise of future equal pay legislation. Under pressure from their union officials, who wanted to get their male members back to work, the women agreed to return to the factory in exchange for a seven per cent wage increase, a court of inquiry to independently investigate their grading issue and the promise of future equal pay legislation. The resulting court of inquiry only investigated the cause of the dispute and established that the women's original grievance was over grading rather than equal pay. The court criticised the NUVB and AEF officials for reneging on their collective grading agreement with the company and suggested they had taken advantage of the issue of equal pay, which had 'played no part in the events leading up to the strike'.²² Their criticism of the AEF in particular was underpinned by the fact that they had rejected a deal to narrow the differential between male and female wages in the factory two years earlier.²³ The court acknowledged that whilst the women's grading grievance was genuine, it was based on their own 'misunderstandings' of how the independent grading committee had evaluated the characteristics of their job, rather than sex discrimination.²⁴

The sewing machinists were devastated, with shop steward Lil O'Callaghan reflecting in 1978: 'We mucked it up. We should have left it open to fight another battle

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2,000 stop work for equal pay

From ARTHUR MILLIGAN

GLASGOW, Thursday.

ALMOST 2,000 women engineering workers took part in a token stoppage here today in protest at the employers' attitude to the national wage claim.

The women were cheered by their male colleagues as they walked out of the various factories.

Nearly every plant in the vast Hillington industrial estate was affected and the strikers roared approval when they learned that women workers at factories in East Kilbride and at Rothes of Linwood, had joined their strike.

At the Hillington Estate, the determination of the strike—which was started by the 500 women workers at Rolls-Royce—was crystallised by the attitude of the hundreds who attended an open-air meeting.

Blocked road

At 3 p.m. prompt they walked out of the various factories carrying placards, and marched to the meeting-place singing "equal pay" songs.

My own transport was held up as we entered the estate by more than 100 workers from the Ever Ready factory, who blocked the road as they marched along chanting slogans.

They received a great cheer from the women already gathered at the meeting-point, and a forest of placards was raised high to show the solidarity with their demands.

A great roar of approval went up for the speech by Miss Aanes McLean, the women's representative, at the giant Rolls-Royce factory at Hillington.

Greatest cheer

Miss McLean reminded the meeting that Barbara Castle and Judith Hart had been given new jobs but no one had suggested that they take a drop in wages because they were women.

But the greatest cheer of all came when Miss McLean, in attacking the employers, declared "It's a case of the fat profits and wage packets suffering from malnutrition."

The meeting dispersed after unanimously passing a resolution, put forward by Rolls-Royce convenor Mr. George McCormack, warning that further token stoppages might be necessary.

The resolution strongly protested at "the treatment being meted out in national negotiations on the question of progress toward equal pay for work of equal value."

Strike won

A lightning strike for equal pay by women at two Yorkshire factories owned by Brook Motors Ltd, has resulted in a 27s increase for the women who are employed in the winding department.

The women, 50 of them, walked out from the factories at Barnsley and Honeley on Monday. A shop steward said: "They were incensed at the calling off of the national engineering strike and the employers' attitude to equal pay."

The women returned to work yesterday after the management had agreed to increase their bonus payments by 20 per cent.

Press cutting from the *Morning Star* 25 October 1968, reporting a strike by 2,000 women workers at the Rolls Royce factory in Hillington, Glasgow in support of equal pay.



on another day'.²⁵ Fellow shop steward, Rose Boland echoed her disillusionment: '[. . .] although we did get more money, we did not gain the point, we won a battle, but lost the war'.²⁶ The ambiguities of the strike's meaning were reflected in the press at the time. Whilst Barbara Castle celebrated a victory for 'common sense' and the unions involved toasted a victory in 'the long march for equal pay', the *Barking and Dagenham Post* condemned the strike as a 'crippling defeat for the company' and *The Times* criticised Barbara Castle for ignoring her prices and incomes policy.²⁷ An article in *New Society* perhaps summed up the meaning of the strike most aptly by suggesting: 'the women emerged as pawns in the game. In all a sordid and unnecessary mess which makes nonsense of the Engineering Union's pretence that the strike was a noble battle in the struggle for equal pay'.²⁸ The notion that the strike represented a victory for equal pay was further undermined by the fact that the sewing machinists had to wait until 1984 to have their work re-graded and never experienced equal pay themselves.

Bearing this context in mind, it must be asked why a strike that was considered a defeat at the time has been publically remembered, and in fact celebrated, as a victory in women's struggle for equal rights?

Appropriation of the strike and public memory

The Ford sewing machinists' strike is not the first example of a women's dispute to be celebrated as a victory, despite the fact that the workers interpreted its outcome as a defeat. Penny Summerfield has shown that a strike for equal pay by female workers at the Rolls Royce engineering factory in Hillington, near Glasgow, in 1943 became a '*cause célèbre*' and was erroneously seen as a victory for the "rate for the job", when the unions involved had actually negotiated a deal that informally preserved sex-related pay grades in the factory.²⁹ Similarly, although the sewing machinists at Ford did not gain the re-grading they desired, their strike has been seen as a landmark in British industrial relations, widely associated with prompting the 1970 Equal Pay Act and presaging a period that saw the emergence of the



On strike and on the picket line. Photo: Pat Mantle/Trades Union Congress Collections, London/Metropolitan University.

Similarly, trade unionists and Barbara Castle have attempted to appropriate the strike into their own histories as a symbol of their role, and success, in fighting for equal pay. For example, the TGWU issued a commemorative plate in 1984 to celebrate the 1968 sewing machinists' 'equal pay victory' with a scroll of honour paying tribute to nine male union officials involved in the dispute, but only three of the female sewing machinists. Since 2006, the TUC has included a short article and film about the strike on their website entitled 'Winning Equal Pay', which includes extracts of interviews carried out with some of the women involved.³³ Barbara Castle also claims the strike represented a turning point in her memoirs, suggesting it 'fired her determination to force the macho male chauvinists in the Treasury to accept the principle of equal pay', and subsequently takes credit for resolving the dispute and passing this 'historic' legislation.³⁴

From an historical perspective, Sheila Rowbotham argues that: 'The action of the Ford women and the discussions about equal pay gave impetus to the emergence of the women's movement in Britain'.³⁵ Lynne Segal claims that they 'provided the early role models for the Women's Liberation Movement'.³⁶ Sarah Boston also describes the strike as: 'a radical turning point [...] from which the women's movement in the British labour movement took off'.³⁷ Most recently, Selina Todd has suggested the dispute represented an important break from the past that accentuated the need for trade unions to represent the interests of female workers.³⁸ The strike is frequently cited in more general histories of women and industrial relations from this period as an example of women trade unionists' militancy.³⁹

As a result, the strike has become fixed in post-war historical narratives of women and work as a turning point, symbolising the beginning of increased gender equality in the workplace to accompany women's growing presence in the workforce, trade unions and politics. While not necessarily denying the wider impact of the strike, to remember it as a turning point in the history of women's work risks sidelining the protagonists' own reading of events. It is important to recognise that, until the release of the feature film, this collective remembering has taken place separately from the sewing machinists themselves. This means that such public historical narratives have been constructed without incorporating the protagonists' recollections, which in some sense has denied their specific agency as the strike has become a victory of and for 'all' women and 'all' workers. Remembering the strike as a victory only considers its impact upon legislation and the trajectories of feminist groups and the labour movement, whilst the sewing machinists' memories of the strike, and their subsequent experiences of work, have largely been ignored.

Women's Liberation Movement and increased gender equality in Britain. This public memory of the strike has been appropriated by feminist activists and trade unionists to fit in with their own progressive narratives of this period.

Feminist activists have identified the strike as an important moment in the formation of the Women's Liberation Movement during the 1970s. Writing in 1974, Sheila Rowbotham and Beatrix Campbell claimed: '[...] an important shift has occurred since the Ford women's strike in 1968 [...] which undoubtedly encouraged other women'.³⁰ Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell acknowledged the limitations of the sewing machinists' victory, but claimed that a large number of women they had interviewed cited the strike as an important event that led them towards feminism in the early stage of the movement.³¹ Later on in the period, Ruth Eliot wrote in *Feminist Review* that the strike, and the subsequent formation of the National Joint Action Campaign for Women's Equal Rights (NJACWER), had fired the enthusiasm of the women's movement.³²

The film and public memory

The feature film *Made in Dagenham* serves to transmit the idea that the dispute represented a crucial turning point in women's battle for equal pay to a wider audience, including the sewing machinists themselves. Similar to other feature films about industrial disputes, *Made in Dagenham* is based on the 'real' events of the strike, but dramatises the relevant social processes and political debates through the personal narratives of fictional characters, mostly Rita O'Grady, played by actor Sally Hawkins.⁴⁰ Rita is a fictional rank and file worker with limited trade union experience; weary of being patronised by a variety of men in her life, she decides to stand up and fight for her rights. In a dispute that begins as a demand for skill recognition, she develops her consciousness of gender inequality and transforms the sewing machinists' grading claim into the wider, and apparently more important, demand for equal pay. It ends with the sewing machinists embracing Barbara Castle after Rita convinces her to ignore Ford's threats to take their business out of Britain and implement equal pay in the future. The final captions proclaim that: 'Two years later in May 1970 the Equal Pay Act became law. Similar legislation quickly followed in most industrial countries across the world', and could as well say 'they all lived happily ever after.'

One of the reasons for the film's popularity and box office success is because it depoliticises the strike and achieves social consensus by transforming the sewing machinists from militant trade unionists fighting against class inequality and exploitation into ordinary women concerned with liberal rights and social justice. In the process, it makes the audience feel comfortable about what can be achieved by ordinary people. The producers pointed this out themselves, explaining:

History tells us their story has a feel-good ending: we know that these women's actions indirectly ushered in the Equal Pay Act in 1970 [...] Certainly it's about little guys who win [...] We could have tried to make a Ken Loach style film, but we knew we didn't want to make a political movie. We wanted a populist piece [...] And we tried to avoid making class a major issue.⁴¹

As film scholars Tom Brown and Belen Vidal have recently suggested, this type of biopic film utilises the performance of a key individual, like Rita O'Grady, to engineer social consensus 'mediating between society and the text, displacing the ideological incoherencies of the film's discourse into spectacle'.⁴² For example, the film climaxes with Rita making a dramatic speech at the TUC annual conference, where she pleads with the male union delegates to recognise and support women's basic right for equal pay. In doing so, the film smooths over the historical incoherency that it was actually male trade union officials who had to persuade the female workers to support the issue of equal pay. By using an ordinary woman appealing to logic and reason to justify their demand for equal pay, the film avoids dealing with the

complexity of the dispute and presents a version of the strike that aligns with the idea that this was a progressive campaign for women's rights.

Film is a significant medium through which events or experiences are publically memorialised in a manner that reinforces a particular version of the past.⁴³ The relationship between film and collective memory has often been written about in relation to war. Maud Bracke has shown how French films about the Second World War produced in the period from its immediate aftermath to 1968 self-consciously presented the war in relation to the present political concerns and attitudes of their producers. However, with growing political consensus in France during the 1970s and 1980s, films about the war became increasingly depoliticised and the war became a subject of fascination and nostalgia rather than a battleground for political meaning in collective memory.⁴⁴ Similarly, in the context of Britain, Geoff Eley argues that war films have conveyed a collective memory of national pride in the egalitarianism of the war effort and celebrate 'a complex of democratic traditions stressing decency, liberalism, and the importance of everyone pulling together, in a way that honoured the value and values of ordinary working people.'⁴⁵

Since the 1990s there have been a number of popular films concerned with working-class lifestyles as a depoliticised subject of fascination, such as *The Full Monty* (1997) or *Billy Elliot* (2000). In these other 'feel-good' films, experiences of class inequality are presented in ways that create an illusion that hard work is rewarded, and inequality and adversity can be overcome by ordinary individuals. These films' production coincided with the decline of class as a collective political identity, as people have increasingly sought to assert their 'ordinariness' and distance themselves from the political implications of 'class'.⁴⁶ *Made in Dagenham* also exemplifies this phenomenon, as the producers self-consciously depoliticised the strike in a bid to achieve a sense of nostalgia and also to appeal to the values of ordinary people. As a result, the sewing machinists' strike is portrayed (and publically remembered) as a symbol of how ordinary people have enabled British society to overcome gender inequality. By representing the strike as victorious, the film transforms the exploitation of working-class women in low-paid, undervalued work into an historical entity, and allows the audience to feel good about themselves by suggesting it was a victory for liberal democracy, with the government recognising the concerns of hard-working ordinary people.

The strike in personal memory

By presenting a fixed and socially-accepted version of the past in public memory, films also have an important impact upon an individual's personal memory by affirming or contradicting their private experience and interpretation of the past. For example, Alistair Thomson suggested that whilst some Australian war veterans recounted scenes of heroism directly from the film *Gallipoli* as their own memories, others were silenced and made to feel uncomfortable by the lack of confor-

mity between such heroic versions of the war and their personal experiences.⁴⁷ As Michael Roper has pointed out, personal accounts of the past are never produced in isolation from public narratives and must operate within the terms of the cultural scripts available to them.⁴⁸ Yet personal memories are not always subsumed within a collective narrative; it is now clear that individuals form alternative memories that both draw upon public scripts but are also shaped by their own interpretation of their experience that fits with contemporary discourses, as well as their present sense of self.⁴⁹ This interaction between the personal and public was quite evident from interviewing the Ford sewing machinists.

It was apparent that the sewing machinists have only seen their strike within the wider context of the history of women's work since the production of the film and the subsequent invasion of the press and people like myself into their lives. Whilst they all commented on how they had enjoyed the film (with the exception of the swearing and undressing in the factory), they also felt that it had completely changed the way that the strike had been remembered. For example, Sheila explained to me:

Well when the film came out and then all this hulla-balloo came along, you realise how brave we were and how good we were, but we didn't think that at time. It was just another strike!⁵⁰

They also pointed out that they had never made the demand for equal pay themselves, and agreed that the strike was clearly over the issue of skill recognition. This was summed up most clearly by Sheila, who discussed the sense of injustice she felt both before and after the strike:

It was a skilled job. I mean you had to have two years machining experience before Ford would even consider taking you on [...] and there's a man going around with a broom getting B grade same as us. We could get up and use his broom, but he couldn't sit down and use our machine, so we felt we was skilled!⁵¹

Vera pointed out:

The money came into it, but it was the fact that they wouldn't class us as skilled – That's what we fought for wasn't it? But it all got turned around, which was to everybody else's convenience, wasn't it?⁵²

The discrepancy between the public memory of the dispute as an equal pay strike and the sewing machinists' personal understanding of its meaning was demonstrated by Gwen, who pointed out that they had not experienced the benefits of their strike's 'victory' themselves and had actually considered it a defeat at the time, saying: 'I mean to us at the time we didn't realise how big it was going to get, did we?' Eileen agreed: 'We came out and we wanted the C grade but we didn't get it, what was it sixteen years later we got it, and we still had to fight for it [...] When you think about it Ford's had definitely won.'⁵³

Sheila remembered that rather than celebrating a victory after the meeting with Barbara Castle – which Castle claimed in her memoirs ended with them parting as 'best of friends' – she was disappointed at their decision to return to work, and had actually voted to stay out on strike longer.⁵⁴ Gwen explained:

It's only since the film that all this stuff has come up isn't it? That's because I mean we were ignored virtually as soon as we went back to work. Let's be honest, at Ford's we went on strike so many times, even though ours was just for us, it didn't mean a thing to the local people, no they were glad to see us back at work.⁵⁵

Eileen suggested that, looking back on it now, having seen the film: 'We were stupid weren't we, we didn't take any proper notice [...] When we started back it was just like we hadn't had a day off.'⁵⁶ So whilst the strike has publically been remembered as a turning point, sending the history of women and equal pay on an upward trajectory towards equality, the sewing machinists had only recognised this wider significance of their action after they had seen the film.

The shift in public memory had forced them to reconsider the significance of the strike within their own life stories. This proved quite difficult for the women, who were now being asked to consider the personal impact of an event that has been publically recognised as a significant historical moment, which hitherto had not represented a turning point in their own lives. For example, Sheila said: 'I mean our strike resulted in equal rights for women, or whatever you call it, that new law [...] but women are still being denigrated today!' Whilst they all agreed with Vera's summary of their action: 'Mind you it's all in the past now, we had a good time; we started something off I guess?' This vague statement indicated the challenges they faced in balancing their past experiences of defeat with present interpretations of the strike's public legacy. Whilst they were aware that they had started 'something' off, they were less clear exactly what that 'something' actually was. This was because they were not involved in the UK Women's Liberation Movement or trade union campaigns that their action was supposed to have had such an important influence on; and more importantly because they had not experienced any of the rights that they were supposed to have won for themselves. This meant that it was difficult for the former sewing machinists to find any personal evidence from their own lives they could align with the public memory of the strike. For example, whilst feminist activists identified the strike as an important formative event in the early stages of UK women's liberation, Gwen explained:

The trouble is that all these groups never bothered with us did they? 'Cos we were asked this a little while ago [...] if we had been fighting with the feminists, and really to tell the truth, I know they had a lot of walks and they got together in London at one time but they never ever thought to invite us did they?⁵⁷

Eileen agreed that it was not until attending a recent meeting that she became aware of the wider movement fighting for women's rights during the 1970s. She said:

We went to that meeting up in London with all those groups of women [...] there was women workers and all kinds of groups that had been fighting for equal rights, but you had never heard of them until we all got together [...] it seems as though women are always fighting on their own all the time.⁵⁸

Sheila said:

Well I've got a bit more militant now, rather than then [...] I think women are still deprived of their rights [...] And the unions aren't about anymore so people don't sort of gather together and raise these issues anymore with regards to just us women. I don't know about men, but women don't seem to get together any more [...] and well there's not the work there for a start anymore, for women to get together. There's certainly no machining.⁵⁹

To the Ford women, although they now felt that they had been fighting for women's rights and equality by demanding to have the skill of their job recognised, they understood that they were doing so on a personal level, unaware and isolated from a wider movement of women fighting over similar issues during this period. Sheila suggested that seeing the strike in this wider context today had actually led her to becoming more militant in the present. This also reveals how she felt her own and other women's militancy had been inhibited by the decline of manufacturing and trade unionism after their strike. It is this issue of remembering the strike within the context of deindustrialisation which demonstrates how the women struggled to realign their memories of their experiences of work after the strike with the collective memory of their strike's success, largely because they had not experienced any of the benefits of it themselves.

Lynn Abrams has recently stressed the importance of understanding how individuals develop strategies to narrate and make sense of their selves in the past in ways that fit with their present sense of self during the process of the oral history interview.⁶⁰ This approach is particularly useful for exploring how individuals also realign their memories of the past to fit in with their present sense of self, which is shaped by public memory. The Dagenham sewing machinists offer a rare case study, in the sense that most people do not have a singular event from their life publically recognised in the form of a feature film that forces them to rethink their past. Equally, most people are not interviewed by oral historians and given the opportunity to consciously realign their memories of the past to fit with their present sense of self. This meant that, throughout my interview, the sewing machinists attempted to compose a narrative that could explain their newfound role as leaders in this key struggle in British labour history, but also accounted for their

personal memory of the limited impact of the strike on their everyday lives at the time.

Without having won equal pay for themselves, or having explicitly fought for women's rights after their strike had finished, the women struggled to identify the strike as an epiphanic moment, or even a rupture with their past in the way that it has been understood culturally. Although the group interview setting prohibited me from gaining individual life stories from the four workers, by asking what they felt had led to collective action and about its subsequent impact upon their lives, my questions required them to resolve a tension between their new understanding of the strike's significance based on public recollection and their individual experience of returning to work as normal.

Graham Smith's theory of transactive memories comes in quite usefully here. He argues that shared stories in a group interview allow individuals to 'critically engage with inherited ideologies' and build common accounts that challenge established assumptions about the past.⁶¹ Whilst I asked my interviewees about their attitudes towards feminism, trade unionism and equal pay, issues that have subsequently been associated with their strike, they had little to say about these themes from the time. Instead of telling stories that consciously related their action to ideas about class solidarity or feminist politics, they collectively fitted the strike into a narrative that focused on their achievements and strength as individuals to explain their role in the conflict. Simultaneously, the sewing machinists dealt with the tension between public narratives of increasing gender equality and their own exclusion from such rights, and measured the impact of their strike by comparing their experiences in the past with those of their family members in the present.

For example, one respondent mentioned that her granddaughter had just graduated from university, which led to a discussion of how women have greater opportunities today than they felt they had in the 1960s. Gwen suggested: 'No I think women today have got better chances at better jobs than we had. I mean I wish I had their education! I mean how many kids in our situation went to university?'⁶² Sheila pointed out:

I would have liked to have been a hairdresser, but my mum said sorry Sheila, I need your money on the machine, and that was it. I was the eldest one out of my sisters and so she needed my money, even though it was only £2 10s a week.⁶³

They all believed that their opportunities for education and a career were limited compared to their daughters and granddaughters because they had all felt compelled to 'help look after the family'.

Although they agreed that women today had greater opportunities to earn more money and participate in different jobs, this did not necessarily equate with the idea that women had gained greater equality since their strike. The evidence for this was that they had never received equal pay themselves and had to wait until



Left to right: Eileen Pullen, Sheila Douglas, Gwen Davis and Vera Sime, when they visited Barking and Dagenham College in June 2013 to take part in a 'question time' session with students.

1984 for the skilled nature of their work to be recognised, by which time they were close to retiring. Equally, they were unsure as to whether or not women really had gained equal rights since their strike. Vera said:

There are no factories anymore. Any time you read in the paper today about a single woman who wants to fight for something in the office, she has to go through the courts to get anywhere [...] we asked Theresa May about this didn't we? But of course she couldn't answer that because she had to be clever with what she said [...] Women are still fifteen per cent behind men's wages and it seems as though we're being held down all the time. It seems like not much has changed since all those years ago when we were working...⁶⁴

Whilst they recognised that women had greater opportunities for career progression since their strike, they did not feel that this had necessarily improved the daily lives of women like themselves, especially within the context of deindustrialisation. Sheila pointed out:

In those days, you could walk out of a job and go straight into another one. There were so many jobs about, nobody needed to be out of work. They had factories everywhere in Dagenham didn't they? If you walked out, next day you'd find something else [...] there's nothing there now [...] There used to be trade unions, well Mrs Thatcher put paid to them, to put it bluntly [...] I mean honestly if they brought back industries, half the young people who are walking around now would have a job and something to do...⁶⁵

One respondent discussed how the demise of the Ford factory had affected her son and another explained the difficulties her adult grandchildren currently faced in earning enough money to be able to afford to move out of their parents' home:

I noticed now, the youngsters [...] I was so shocked [...] they're going to work, a lot of them, but they don't give up any rent money to their parents [...] but that's not teaching them any independence is it?⁶⁶

By sharing this information with each other, the women collectively constructed an account that revealed their uncertainty over the wider political meaning of their strike. This instability in the present was placed in contrast to their own lives at the time of their strike. Although they all insisted that the strike was explicitly over the issue of grading, they also stressed the importance of their wages at the time because three of them had just bought their own houses with mortgages and were raising their families. Gwen pointed out:

I mean all of us had just started buying our homes when we went to work, didn't we? I mean I had only had my house for five years or six years before the strike [...] and having a family, and having to look after my mum, my wages were really important.⁶⁷

Vera was twenty-six and Eileen was in her early thirties when they bought their first homes and they agreed how important it was for them to 'have a bed for life'; Sheila stressed how proud she was of the fact that she

had worked and independently supported herself throughout her life. Whilst criticising the policies of the current coalition government, she explained: 'We all vote Labour – we're working-class so you do, don't you? I ain't got anything to conserve; everything I've got I earned! You have to work for it don't you?'⁶⁸ It was then pointed out that: 'We certainly didn't work for pin money, it was for making a better life for yourself and your family.'⁶⁹

By comparing the situation of women in the past to the present, the sewing machinists collectively made sense of both why they had gone on strike in 1968 and what it has meant to them subsequently. They realigned their personal memory of defeat with the public memory of the strike as a key turning point leading to equality for women by framing this discussion around ideas about independence, autonomy and the ability to make a better life for themselves; ideas that they associated with their own struggle and felt had subsequently been eroded in the period since. Whilst they all commented that their women relatives had greater opportunities for further education, they also suggested that full employment and union representation in the past had enabled working-class women like themselves to fight for their rights in a way that they felt no longer occurred in the present.

Conclusion

The 1968 Ford sewing machinists' strike is an unusual example of an industrial dispute from this period that has been publically remembered, even celebrated, as having an important national impact. By representing the strike as a feel-good victory for the sewing machin-

ists, the film *Made in Dagenham* ignores what the strike meant to the individual women who took part in it and its subsequent impact upon the rest of their lives, while depoliticising the persistence of gender equality in the period since. This raises issues about how class and gender inequality in the past is publically remembered and interpreted, and whose memory of such inequality is accepted and portrayed in the public sphere.

The film of the strike offered a unique opportunity to explore the influence of public memory upon individual recollection, as most working-class women, indeed most people, do not have feature films made about events directly related to their past that identify them as extraordinary. The film forced the sewing machinists to rethink the significance of their 1968 strike for equal grading within the rest of their life stories, to fit in with their newfound role as 'history-makers'. However, rather than embracing this public understanding of the significance of their action, and reinterpreting it as a 'happy ending', the women I interviewed shared their own real experiences and concerns about inequality and instability in the present to preserve their individual memory of the strike as a defeat. Whilst the film makers had aimed to avoid 'making class a major issue', the sewing machinists' own understanding of the significance of their strike continued to be shaped by class tensions. Sustaining continuity with earlier traditions in UK oral history, these responses indicate the centrality of class to individuals' personal understanding of the past, alongside gender and other cultural repertoires, in spite of the decline of class as a collective political identity since the 1980s.

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NOTES

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